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ABSTRACT

Women seeking to realize the feminist goal of autonomy, defined as self-interested decision-making, encounter conflict and anxiety. This study reports a group experience, using life-space drawings and force-field analyses to reduce anxiety and foster autonomous decision-making. Of the 15 women participants in the year-long study, 100% reported at least one action in the area originally designated for decision-making. Among the components in the process, participants cited identification with and support and information from, other group members. The results suggest that for the women in this study, group participation enhanced individual autonomy. (Author)

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FEMINISM AND PSYCHOLOGICAL AUTONOMY:

A STUDY IN DECISION-MAKING*

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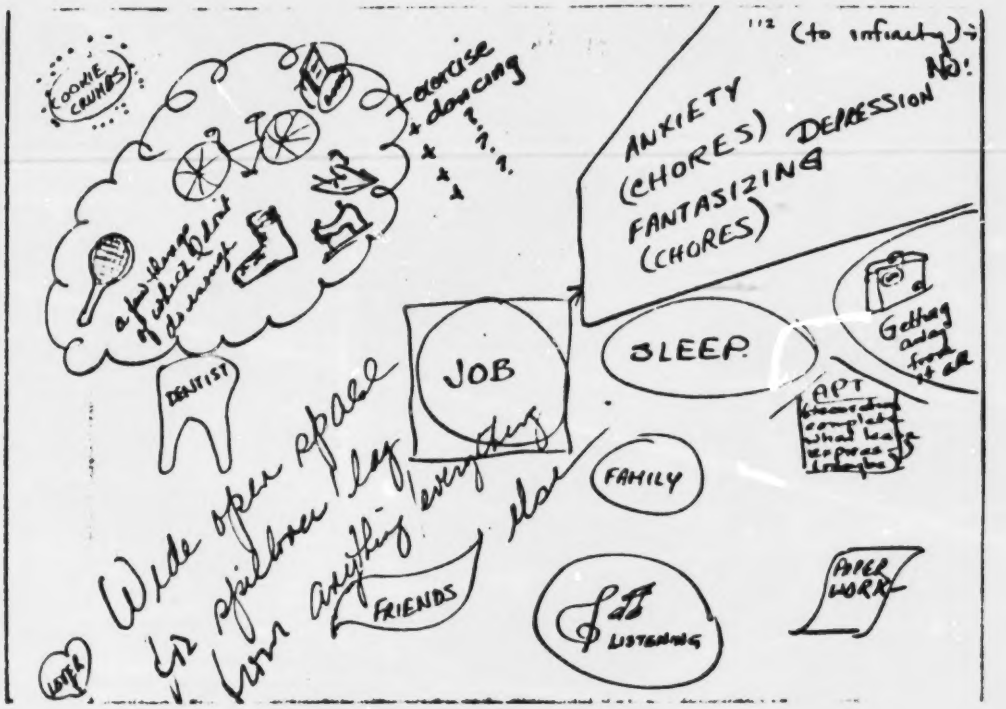
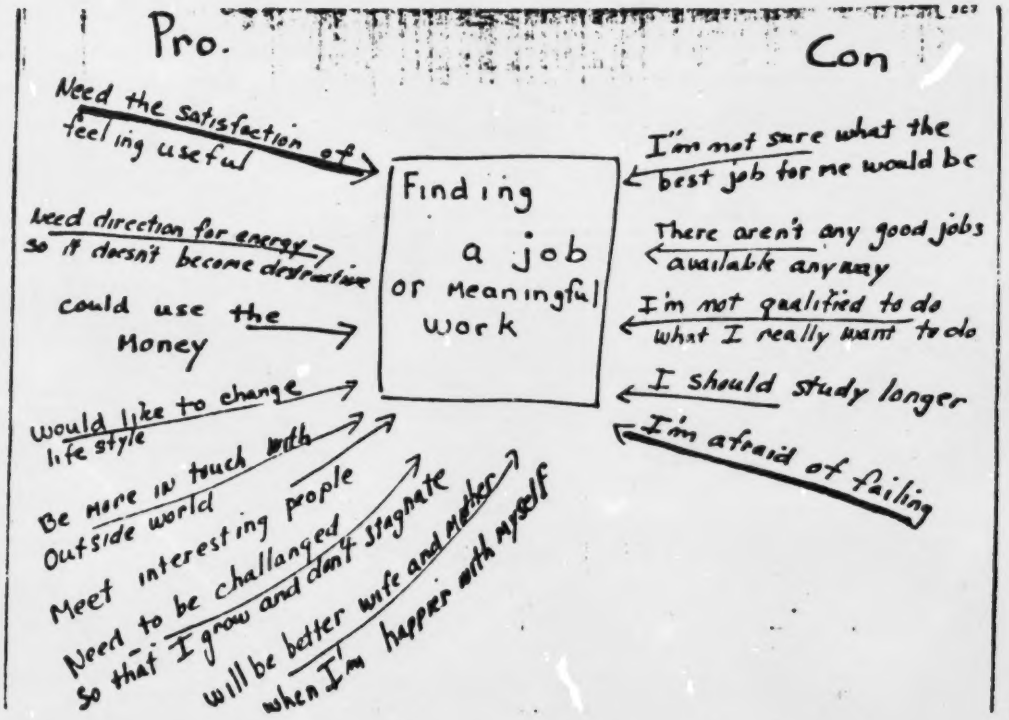
Figure 1



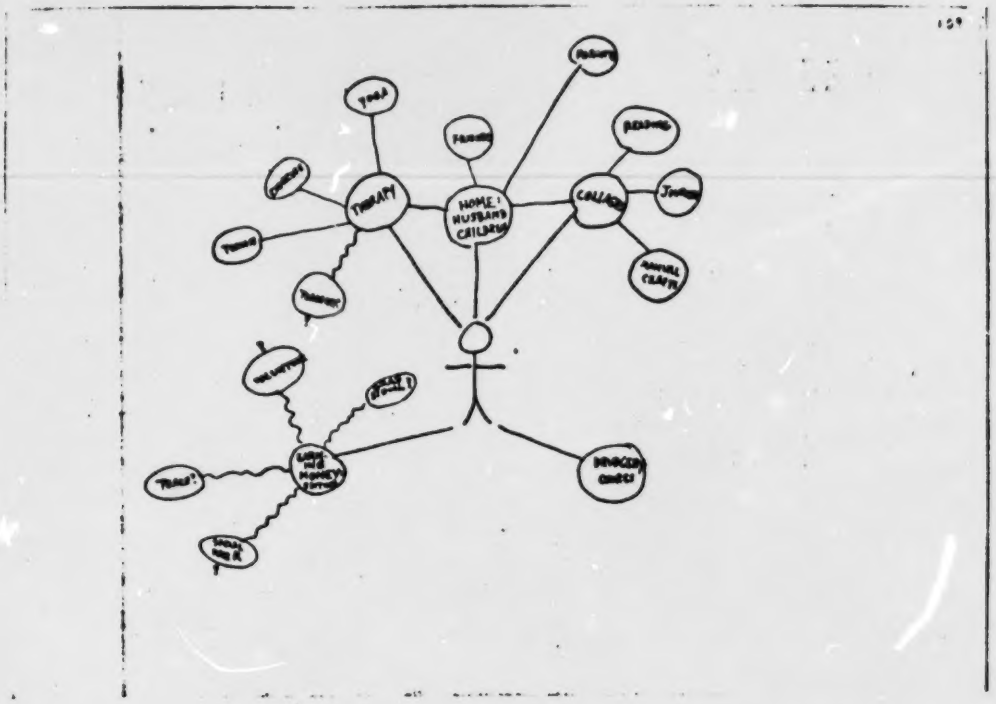
Example of life-space drawing from Session I.

Figure 2


Pro.
Con
Need the satisfaction of feeling useful
Finding a job or meaningful work
I'm not sure what the best job for me would be
Need direction for energy so it doesn't become destructive
There aren't any good jobs available anyway
could use the Money
I'm not qualified to do what I really want to do
I should study longer
Would like to change life style
I'm afraid of failing
Be more in touch with Outside world
Meet interesting people
Need to be challanged So that I grow and don't stagnate
will be better wife and mother when I'm happier with myself

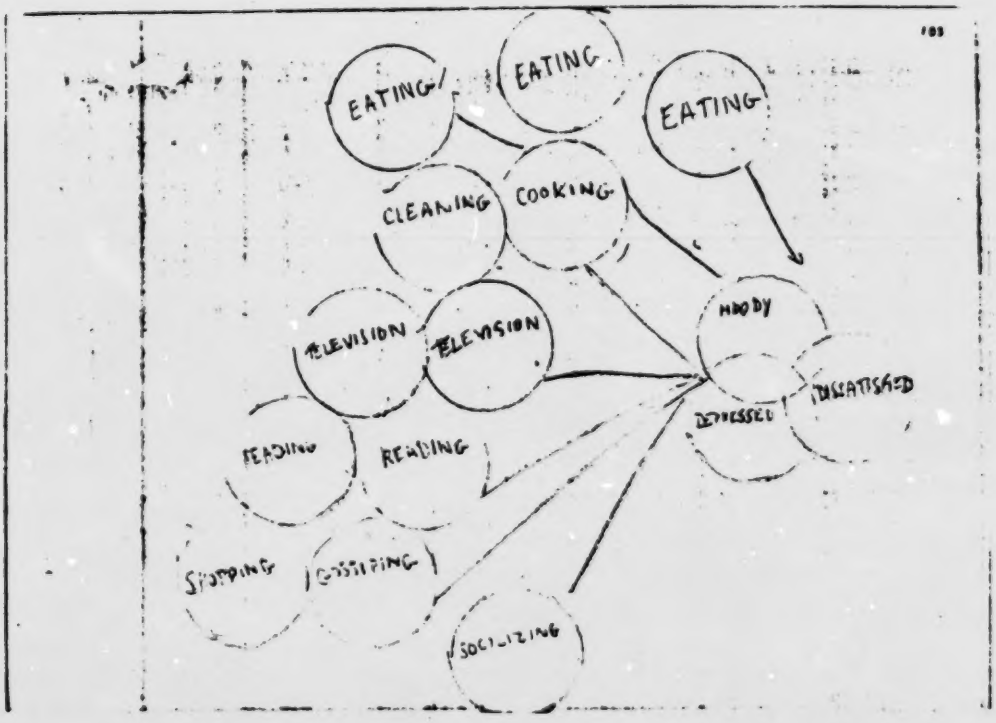
Example of force-field analysis from Session II.

Figure 3



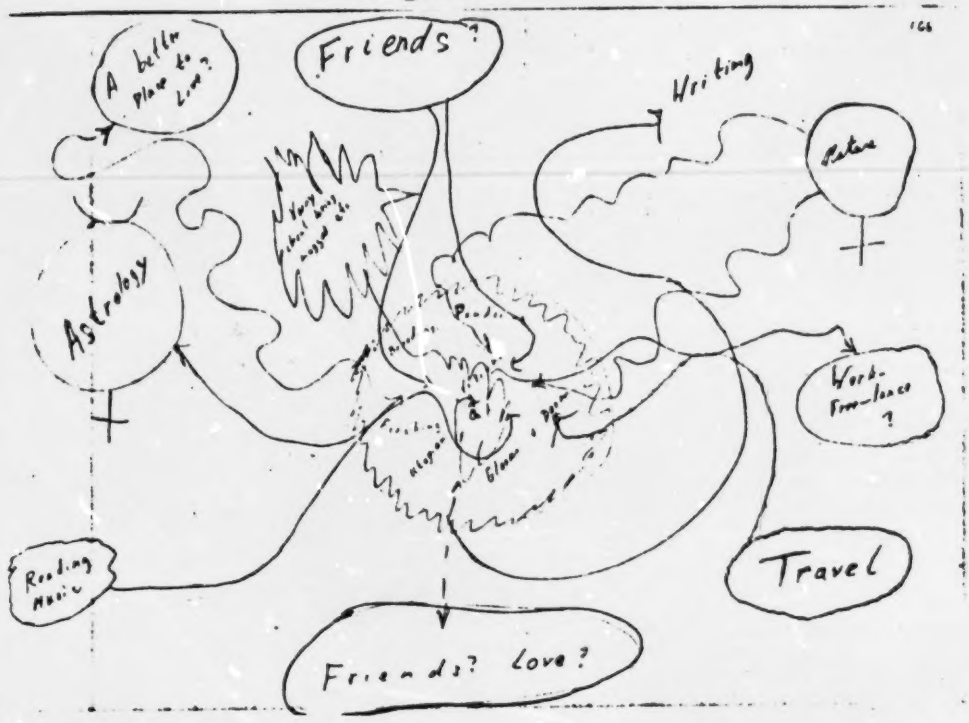
First life-space drawing done by a 35-year-old art book editor, who is married.

Figure 4



First life-space drawing by 49-year-old married woman, with college-age children.

Figure 5



First life-space drawing by unemployed, divorced 38-year-old woman.

FEMINISM AND PSYCHOLOGICAL AUTONOMY: A STUDY IN DECISION-MAKING

> Autonomy for me is believing in my own ability to do what I want to do, ... then taking productive, creative steps toward fulfilling my own goals. ... Autonomy for me is a personal thing, an internal thing, feeling that I have power.[1]

This study investigates psychological autonomy in women in relation to the process of decision-making. By autonomy, we mean self-rule, or more broadly, self-determination. When women are meeting the expectations of predetermined roles, then we are not autonomous. By challenging the conditioning that limited women's options, the contemporary feminist movement provides a social context for women to examine the conduct of their lives, and to consider making changes in the direction of greater autonomy.

Some critics attribute to the feminist movement a new set of expectations for women, as binding and constricting as the old set. In this interpretation, women must become "achievers" and those without a career are seen as failures, much as in the older stereotype those with careers were seen to be failures as women. This pressure to conform does not create options, but simply replaces one kind of limiting conditioning with

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[1]All participant quotes cited in this paper are taken from questionnaire responses or tape transcripts of group sessions.

another. In our concept, an autonomous decision draws from the feminist movement an awareness of options. From this perspective, a decision to go to work and a decision to stop working could be equally autonomous decisions for two women in differing life circumstances.[2]

An awareness of options does not by itself lead automatically to greater autonomy. It is outside of the scope of this paper to document the economic and social barriers to the achievement of full self-determination for women (Blaxall & Reagan, 1976, among others). But beyond that, translating autonomy into the realm of behavior is a matter of individual decisions and actions, however minute. Our early research indicated that the strength of conditioning and socialization for the role of "woman" makes self-interested decision-making deeply conflictual. We found that, in seeking to make decisions that were not "selfless" in the classic prescription but that focused on what the woman wanted for herself, many women expressed great anxiety.[3]

In seeking a means to reduce the anxiety surrounding self-interested decision-making among women, we designed a small group workshop. In a traditional decision-making group, the purpose is to guide the participants toward a certain conformity of opinions and actions (Klein, 1963). In contrast, the workshop we developed used the small group, with the pressures that no doubt exist within any such group, to reach a diversity: as in the consciousness-raising process developed by the contemporary feminist

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[2]Actual decisions by two members of the group we studied; see results, below.

[3]Our work is, in part, in the context of the issues raised by achievement motivation research (Hoffman, 1972; Horner, 1972; O'Leary, 1974).

movement, we sought to facilitate decision-making by each participant in her own interest and for herself.

Our original design was a one-session workshop for a small group of women which incorporated our modification of the life-space drawing.[4] Our current research builds on that workshop, expanding it into a one-year study, in which we investigated the following questions:

(1) What proportion of the women who participate in the group setting we design identify areas for decision-making?

(2) What proportion of the participants take actions in the decision-making areas they identify? (For this study, a decision is defined as an action taken and reported to the researchers.)

(3) What components in the process of decision-making within the group setting can be identified?

Method

The design was a series of four sessions with a group of 15 women, held during a two-month period with a follow-up one year later.

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[4]In the original life-space drawing, the individual draws a "topology" which includes the person, his/her goals, and the path he/she can take to achieve them. By implication, it is future-oriented (Lewin, 1935; Scholz, Prince, & Miller, 1975). The technique was initially modified by Hover, Levy, & Sacks (1971); the modification omits the goal-orientation and focuses on the present reality.

Group Members

The group was recruited through notices in local newspapers and on flyers reading: "Feminist project: seeking women considering changes to participate in study of decision-making." Respondents were interviewed by telephone and given a full description of the research project. Those women willing to attend all four sessions and to release all materials to the researchers under a guarantee of anonymity were admitted to the group on a first-come basis. None of the participants was previously known to either researcher.

The fifteen women[5] ranged in age from 21 to 54 -- four were in their 20's, three in their 30's, four in their 40's and four in their 50's. Within the group, three were collecting unemployment benefits, three were self-employed business-women, one was a sales representative, one was a women's rights worker, one was a computer programmer, three were full-time housewives, one was a free-lance editor, and two were teachers. Two had been in a women's group (consciousness-raising) previously; 13 had not. Nine reported private or group therapy experience; six did not. At the time the study began, five women were single; four were married; six were divorced. Eight participants had no children; seven had children, of whom three had young children still at home. The group consisted of women "touched" by feminism, in that they responded to the wording "feminist project" in the announcement of the study, but did not identify themselves

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[5]Fifteen of the 18 women whom we interviewed and who attended the first session remained for the entire study. A 19th attending at the invitation of a friend did not return for subsequent sessions.

as active feminists (only two mentioned previous involvement in feminist organizations). Thus with regard to age, occupation, and experience, the group was heterogeneous.

Group Sessions

The sessions, three and one-half hours each, were held at a college women's center on four evenings from March through May 1975, spaced progressively two, three, and four weeks apart.

At the first session, after a brief introduction to the themes of autonomy and decision-making, we asked the participants to "draw a picture of how you spend your time, labelling every part," including the areas they found hard to draw or the places where they felt "stuck." We explained that the pictures could be realistic or abstract, as were the models displayed, and that they required no artistic talent. We supplied 18" x 24" newsprint paper and drawing materials. When the drawings were completed, the women formed pairs and explained their drawings to one another. Each person then had an opportunity to re-examine her drawing and to make any clarifications she chose. Finally the entire group reconvened and each person described her drawing.

Insert Plate 1 about here

At the second session, we showed the group a model of a force-field analysis (Hover, Levy, & Sacks, 1971). We asked each person to choose a dilemma, "a particular issue or area that you want to change." We directed them to write the dilemma in the center of the newsprint paper and on either side, to list facilitating and restraining forces in resolving that dilemma. The group was then divided into two sections, each led by one of the leaders, in which the women presented and explained their dilemmas.

Insert Plate 2 about here

At the third session, we summarized and discussed common themes among the facilitating and restraining forces that the women had listed on their force-field analyses. Each woman then described to the whole group the current status of the dilemma she had outlined at the previous session.

At the final session, we repeated the procedure of the first: each woman drew a life-space drawing. In addition, on the back of the drawings, the women completed the sentence: "Autonomy for me is ...." They then presented their drawings to the entire group, focusing on any changes they had made in the two-month period.

Throughout the four sessions, the procedures we followed as group leaders were: At the beginning of each session, we outlined the format for that session, including the activities and the time allocated for each. We organized the sessions to assure both adequate time for each person to do her life-space drawings and force-field analysis alone, and an equal opportunity for each to present her drawings to the group. Finally, in guiding the discussions, we established as the subject matter what the participants volunteered on their drawings and in their presentations, plus any commentary that was generated, without pressing for further self-revelation. We asked, and encouraged others to ask, clarifying questions about the meaning of particular elements in the drawings, and avoided, and discouraged others from making, judgmental comments.

Data Collection

All life-space drawings and force-field analyses were collected. All

sessions were tape-recorded with the written consent of participants.[6] Participants completed personal information sheets at the first and fourth sessions. At the end of each session, the women completed an open-ended questionnaire, which included the following items: (1) their reactions to the session; (2) their reactions to the task; (3) aspects of their life-space they felt good about; (4) aspects they wanted to work on; (5) new actions they wanted to try.

One year after the final session, in May, 1976, we sent a follow-up questionnaire to each participant, along with a covering letter and their original life-space drawings. This questionnaire, returned by 15 out of 15 participants, included an up-date of personal information, reactions to the group experience, and actions on the issues which concerned them during the sessions.

Functions of Instruments

Life-space Drawings[7]

The life-space drawing at the first session[8] had two salient functions. First, the participants used the drawing to gain a perspective on their current life situations -- as one woman said, "to find out where I'm at." Some participant comments illustrate this first function.

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[6]All drawings were reproduced in slides and then in color prints. Tape recordings were transcribed.

[7]Data drawn from transcript of Session I and Questionnaire I.

[8]The present study includes no data from the second life-space drawings, as the researchers found them peripheral to the decision-making process as reported by the participants.

> It was interesting to see how the pieces of my life fit together -- sort of an aerial view. ... I think it was very productive in helping me see my life in perspective.
>
> /I/ realized how empty my life is at this point.
>
> /I/ wanted to draw and to observe myself drawing so ... I might sneak up on the realest me. ... The contents of my life /are/ richer on viewing than I had thought.

Further, by examining and describing their drawings, the participants identified aspects of their situations which they perceived to be conflictual (Machover, 1949). Some participant comments from Session I demonstrate this second function.

Insert Plates 3, 4, 5 about here

> I have mostly the supportive things and the things ... that lift me up over here .... All these squiggly lines are problems. The biggest thing for me is the money-making area .... I realized how unfulfilling the work was /free-lance editing/. ... I've sort of played it out, and I want, as I have young children, and as I continue, whether they are young or old -- to be financially independent and doing work that I really like.

> I have two children that I am proud of and I am just a housewoman. And I feel that I have to make a change. I am not happy at this time with what I am ... doing. And I just wrote what my day is, you know. I eat, eat, and eat. This is the first thing I'm doing. And after that I clean and I cook and I watch television and I read and read and I shop and gossip and I socialize occasionally and that's why I am very moody and depressed and dissatisfied.
>
> This is very chaotic and it sort of surprised me. I didn't think that I was quite as chaotic as that. But I guess I am .... I noticed -- I didn't do this intentionally -- this happened, that I put circles around everything, and the only thing I didn't put a circle around is the writing .... I've felt very, very blocked in the writing.

Force-field Analysis[9]

The participants used the force-field analysis to focus on a single dilemma, and to separate and examine the forces that they identified as stopping them from (restraining) or helping them toward (facilitating) a resolution of the conflict underlying that dilemma. Thirteen of 15 participants cited this step as useful or facilitative in their decision-making process.[10] Some comments on this function of the force-field analysis were:

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[9]Data drawn from Questionnaires II and III.

[10]Two participants made no such specific reference to the force-field analysis.

> It narrowed down your "dilemmas" to one and made you really think on just one problem.
>
> Made me realize that it's important to focus on a particular issue(s) rather than the whole generalized chaotic mess!
>
> Zeroing in was a good idea and difficult -- essential.

The women listed nearly equal numbers of facilitating and restraining forces (99 and 91 respectively). Of the 91 restraining forces, only five or about five percent referred to obstacles or difficulties they perceived as outside of their control, including age and the limited availability of jobs. The majority of the restraining forces, 86 or about 95 percent, were, upon discussion and re-examination, perceived as being potentially within their control and therefore amenable to change. Some examples here were: "I'm shy," "unsure about my abilities," "might be rebuffed," and "I'll never get anything interesting to /d̄o̲/."

Using the feedback of the group, the participants found that they perceived their facilitating forces as stronger and their restraining forces as weaker than they had previously believed, and thus were able to increase their sense of autonomy with reference to the conflict. After the discussion, two participants commented,

> the restraining forces seemed less valid and the facilitating forces seemed stronger.
>
> As a result of talking and of the group's support, the negative factors lost some of their power.

As one participant concluded,

> by loosening up the dilemma and choosing one path,
> I could pare away irrelevant issues and retain those
> that need to be dealt with now or at some future date.
> The dilemma served to keep me immobilized -- no risks,
> no gains.

Results and Discussion

Decision-Making Areas

Our first research question was: What proportion of the participants identified areas for decision-making? At the first session, all 15 participants (100%) identified areas for decision-making, ranging from one to four areas per person, in eight categories as listed in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

As Table 1 indicates, work/school/career and personal growth were the major decision-making areas within the group, with 13 participants (87%) and 11 participants (73%) citing each area respectively. Less than half of the group (7 participants, 47%) cited love relationships. A considerably smaller number of the women were concerned with other areas: three (20%) with health and age, two (13%) with leisure activities, and one (7%) in each of the remaining categories -- friendships, parenthood, and feminist activities.

Actions Reported

Our second research question was: What proportion of the participants took actions in the decision-making areas they identified?

TABLE 1

Areas for Decision-Making and

Number of Participants Citing Each Area

(N = 15)

Area for Decision-Making	Number of Participants Citing Each Area	
	n	%
Work/school/career	13	87
Self-understanding/ personal growth	11	73
Love relationships	7	47
Health/age	3	20
Leisure activities	2	13
Friendships	1	7
Parenthood	1	7
Feminist activities	1	7

Note: The categories were derived from an examination of the first life-space drawings and the women's statements about the drawings on the tape transcript, in conjunction with Questionnaire I. There was 100% rater agreement, as in all tabulations.

As of the follow-up, all 15 participants (100%) reported actions in the eight areas identified at the outset of the study, in a range of from one to six areas per person. We defined actions as initiatives reported by a participant. An initiative includes starting or stopping some activity; it does not include continuing an activity already in progress at the outset of the study. This definition was expanded in one category, personal growth, to include statements to the researchers reporting self-attitudinal change.

Table 2 presents the areas of actions reported, the number of participants who report actions in an area originally identified by them, and the number who report actions in a "new," not previously identified area.

- - - - - - - - - - - - - -
Insert Table 2 about here
- - - - - - - - - - - - - -

Of the 15 women in the group, 12 reported actions in all the areas they cited originally, from one action in one area to four out of four. The remaining three women took actions in one or more original areas. Thus 100 percent of the participants took at least one action in at least one original decision-making area, and 80 percent took actions in every original decision-making area. In addition, 11 women (73%) took actions in from one to four "new" areas, that is, areas not cited by them at the first session, while four (27%) did not.

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
Insert Tables 3 and 4 about here
- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

Several examples of actions reported follow. In the area of work/school/career, one participant began to make a living in her chosen field, writing and translating; a second took a leave of absence from an unsatisfying

TABLE 2

Areas of Actions and Number of Participants Reporting Actions in Each Area

(N = 15)

Areas of Actions	Number Reporting Actions		Total No. Reporting Actions in Area	
	In Original Area	In "New" Area	n	%
Work/school/ career	12	1	13	87
Self-understanding/ personal growth	10	3	13	87
Love relationships	6	1	7	47
Health/age	2	2	4	27
Leisure activities	2	5	7	47
Friendships	1	6	7	47
Parenthood	1	0	1	7
Feminist activities	1	2	3	20

Note: Actions tabulated from follow-up Questionnaire V.

TABLE 3

Number of Participants Reporting Actions

in Original Decision-Making Areas

(N = 15)

Range of Originally Cited Areas	No. Reporting Actions		
	In All Areas	In Some Areas	In No Areas
1	2	0	0
2	4	1	0
3	3	2*	0
4	3	0	0
Totals	12	3	0

*One of three and two of three.

TABLE 4

Number of Participants Reporting

Actions in "New" Areas

(N = 15)

Range of "New" Areas	No. Reporting Actions
0	4
1	5
2	4
3	1
4	1

job with the city government. In the area of health, one woman reported a weight loss of 75 excess pounds. And in the area of personal growth, another participant reported successfully scheduling leisure activities along with her work for the first time.

Components of the Decision-Making Process

Our third research question was: What components in the process of decision-making within the group setting can be identified? The data indicate that the participants made differential use of the resources available to them. We have already described the functions of the life-space drawings and the force-field analyses.

Leaders' role.[11] In addition, some participants, more than others, found the interventions and the organizational methods of the leaders facilitative of decision-making. A total of nine participants made 16 comments about the role of the leaders. Five participants made eight comments indicating that a leader's "suggestion was the key" or "was important to me," or that they found the format useful. Four participants made eight critical comments, questioning the mode of organization, desiring more "structure," or asking for a more "probing" approach. Six participants made no comment regarding the leaders' role. Thus one-third of the participants found the leaders' role helpful, four expressed misgivings, and for slightly more than one-third the leaders' role did not elicit reaction.

Role of participants. Further, the data indicate that a major component in the decision-making process was the presence and the participation of the group members. Table 5 presents the categories and the distribution of comments by participants regarding their interactions with other group members.

Insert Table 5 about here

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[11]Responses tabulated from Questionnaires I-V.

TABLE 5

Categories and Distribution of Participant Responses

Regarding Interactions with Other Participants

(N = 15)

Category of Response	No. Responding Per Category (% of N)	Distribution of Responses Per Category			
		Positive	Negative	Total	%
Get ideas/advice from others	14 (93%)	30	3	33	27
Get support from others	12 (80%)	37	6	43	36
Find others interesting	11 (73%)	17	0	17	14
Find pleasure in others' gains	9 (60%)	12	1	13	11
Observe commonality	8 (53%)	15	0	15	12
Total No. of Responses		111 (92%)	10 (8%)	121 (100%)	

Note: Tabulated from Questionnaires I-V.

The fifteen participants in the group made a total of 121 comments regarding their interactions with the other women. Of these, 111 or 92 percent were positive, while 10 or eight percent were negative. The positive responses were distributed as follows: Fourteen women reported receiving "ideas," "suggestions," clarification or aid in focusing from other group members (30 comments or 27% of the positive comments), while 12 said they got "reassurance," "support," and "strength" from the other women in the group (37 comments or 33%). Eleven women mentioned finding the other women in the group "fascinating" or "interesting and authentic" (17 or 15%), nine observed that they found the "gains" of others "impressive" and "very exciting" (12 or 11%), and eight remarked on the "common threads," the shared "problems," and the "interrelatability of all of us" (15 or 14%). Of the ten negative observations, made by six participants, six concerned not getting sufficient support or reassurance from other group members.

It is striking that fourteen of the fifteen women (93%) report receiving "ideas," "suggestions," and clarification from other participants in the group, and 12 of the 15 (80%) report receiving "strength," support, and reassurance. In addition, comments by several participants indicate that the presence and the participation of the other women was a factor in reducing their own anxiety about decision-making. One woman said,

> I think its greatest "usefulness" was that it gave me a chance to meet other women in the process of making decisions. It helped me know I was not alone in insecurities, which was both reassuring and confidence-promoting.

A second commented,

> /it is/ gratifying to hear how all of us have similar struggle -- /it/ makes it easier to accept and work with it productively.

And a third participant reported,

> it helped us to understand and realize that we all have common problems, fears, anxieties, especially about making changes in our lives.

It has been argued (Klein, 1963) that the small group is effective in fostering personal change at least in part because it recapitulates the imitation or identification process used by children within the family during early socialization. Both older and younger women in the group we studied remarked that they looked to the other participants as models. One woman, 49 years old, commented,

> I listened to other women and their way of handling change.

Another participant, 25, said,

> I think the older women in the group were helpful to me as role models -- one thing I worry about is getting into a rut as I get older, and it was good to see women who had done a variety of things in their lives deciding to do more.

These data suggest that, within the group setting we designed, the women used this identification process effectively, not only to gain information about decision-making, but to reduce the strength of their early conditioning and in particular, to lower the anxiety level surrounding

self-interested or autonomous decision-making. Thus they were able to reinforce their own sense of autonomy in taking the actions they reported to the researchers. As one woman said,

> at the time and now still, the best help was from those women who stressed the importance of doing what I wanted to do rather than what I felt I ought to do, and that is what I've followed through by having a child.

Conclusion

As our research questions indicate, it was our expectation in designing this study that only a certain proportion of the women in the group would make decisions. As the results show, in fact 100 percent of the participants reported one or more actions as of the follow-up. The fact that the participants joined and stayed with the study indicates that they were all motivated from the outset. In addition, the components in the process appear to have been: the instruments, as a means of increasing awareness of conflict and then reducing that conflict; and the group setting, including the role of the leaders and the role of the participants themselves, in reducing anxiety and in providing a supportive atmosphere for individual decision-making.

In particular, we draw attention to the element of identification stressed by the participants. The heterogeneity of the group in and of itself demonstrated the feminist concept of options for women. The participants were able to use the group setting to increase their individual sense of psychological autonomy. As one woman wrote,

the group exercises and attitudes contributed toward my honest evaluation of some work and personal conflicts. The first life-space drawing was a particularly clear evaluation of the place I was in last spring -- troubled by my job, driving myself too hard .... The force-field analysis uncovered my lack of confidence in demonstrated skills. The group's approval of my abilities was an important reinforcement. Would that our larger society offered such ... support!

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PRINT: PLATE #:

112 1

Caption: Example of life-space drawing from Session I.

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307 2

Caption: Example of force-field analysis from Session II.

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109 3

Caption: First life-space drawing done by a 35-year-old free-lance art book editor, who is married.

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103 4

Caption: First life-space drawing by 49-year-old married woman, with college-age children.

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106 5

Caption: First life-space drawing by unemployed, divorced 38-year-old woman.